

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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Cooperation and Religion *

The relation between religion and the cooperative movement defined and expounded.

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ONE OF THE Rochdale pioneers' fundamental principles, heartily endorsed and vigorously defended, is that cooperation shall be neutral in the matter of religion. The value of this rule can be appreciated more today when the need for it is even greater. For cooperation has moved beyond the confines of Britain and its several sects into a wide world that has innumerable forms of worship and systems of religious thought. It has moved into the orbit of men who believe in one God, of men who worship many gods, and of men who do not believe in any god at all. If all these are to find a common ground in cooperation, they must observe a common silence on their conflicting views while they face a common enemy. That unity is found through the common denominator of right reason which is the norm for every activity of society.

The fact that cooperative business cannot be run along sectarian lines does not mean, however, that religion and cooperation will bear no relation to each other. Cooperation needs religion and religion needs cooperation. The Rochdale pioneers did not become cooperators by ignoring three thousand years of religious thought. They and their principles were not the product of their own generation only. Like ourselves, they drew from the past, consciously or unconsciously. Like them, we cannot ignore any force that makes for a better world. We should be fools if we did.

Cooperation related to religion

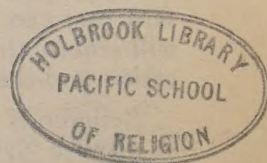
We must not therefore mistake the Rochdale ban on sectarianism in business for a veto on religion in cooperation. Certainly, we have no

justification for suggesting that cooperation is hostile to any creed or that cooperators, as such, put little stock in religion. Properly considered, cooperation postulates more, not less religion. We must have charity and justice, which have their foundation in religion, if we are not to have bigotry. Unfortunately a good deal of this bigotry finds its way into the affairs of men. There is perhaps no greater danger to the success of the cooperative movement than this very thing.

We cannot speak of Catholic cooperation or Protestant cooperation, of Buddhist, Mohammedan, Shinto, or Hebrew economics any more than we can speak of Quaker chemistry or Mormon mathematics. Truth is non-denominational and at the disposal of all. Cooperation in itself is a good thing. It is a body of natural truths acquired by the light of reason. Applied from any motive whatever, even by people without any religion, it would produce good results in the present economic and social setup which is intrinsically bad, which lacks the justice, charity and faith that cooperators regard as essential. There is a danger, however, in its very goodness. It is so promising, so just, and so marked by brotherhood that some people may want to make a new religion of it. And so we would have in our own show of the century two monstrosities side by side, the totalitarian state and the totalitarian economy. That would be even worse than using it as a proselytizing agent or as a means for bolstering decadent deities.

Those who would be cooperators and nothing else need all the help and all the dynamics that other men, especially free men dedicated to God

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and humanity, can give them. Cooperation has not yet advanced so far in the world, even in the most progressive countries, that it can be sure of its own strength. The whole movement for the reconstruction of society is yet in the process of making. We are still rolling the huge stone up the steep hill. If at any point in the ascent we take off the pressure it will go crashing to the bottom. Before we can be sure of ourselves we have to get it firmly at rest on the plateau above. To do that is no small job. It will require all the energy and skill that can be mustered from every source. It will require the spirit that comes to men from education and the self-sacrificing idealism of religion.

Religion is not an opiate. It is food and drink. It is more vivifying and more energizing than the thin gruel of materialist philosophy. It is more stimulating too, and continued stimulation is necessary. Without it, men may grow fat, lazy, stupid, and easy victims of the bargain-dealers and quacks who would be happy to use our cooperative organizations for their own unworthy ends. Religion will not permit men to rest content with mean success but will quicken them with that divine discontent which urges man onward to loftier and more noble, more soul-satisfying heights. "The thirst that from the soul doth rise doth ask a drink divine." To delude men into contentment with less than the greatest good is to betray their trust. That has been part of the sin of our age. We ignored the spiritual for the material good. The great accomplishment of the new age will be to restore the spiritual by using the material as it ought to be used, a means to a higher end.

But if cooperation needs religion, religion also needs cooperation. It is the expression of religion in the economic order. It is an aid to salvation that religious leaders cannot ignore. It is a naturally good thing which must be employed in perfecting the imperfect creature, man. The Christian Church embraced the philosophy of pagan Aristotle, not because it was Christian but because it was philosophy. In the same way, religious people generally will adopt cooperation not because it is religious but because it is truth. The religiously minded man will use all the good things of God's creation to further the cause of humanity and to insure the salvation of souls. He will stop talking about putting religion into cooperation and begin putting religion into cooperators. He will be so imbued with charity, honesty and courage that he will dare to change a system that is so hard, cruel, and relentless that it sins against nearly every ethical principle.

In our day, the economic question has a particular religious significance. As a matter of fact, it is the great modern religious question. For if it is not solved, freedom, culture, and religion may

easily be seriously endangered. The economic question is a religious question, moreover, because the relationships of man to man are involved, the relation of employer and employee, of consumer, producer, and distributor, of individuals and the state. It is more than a question of supply and demand, more than a matter of food, clothing, and shelter. It is basic to the life of man. Economic action is intimately linked up with spiritual activities. It influences all man's action, and when his economic life is deficient there is grave danger of his spiritual life being likewise defective. Poverty is not always holy. It may frequently be a proximate occasion of sin.

There is an old theological principle about the proximate occasion of sin that has social significance for us in this regard. It is so fundamental and so common-sense that it is admitted by all. Right-minded people work on it as a general principle. It is to the effect that no man can be considered seriously solicitous about his spiritual welfare while wilfully remaining in the proximate occasion of sin. He who loves the danger shall perish in it. People brought up in close proximity to barrooms and in a generally immoral environment are not likely to become famous for sanctity. Slum conditions, poverty, and misery are the breeding ground of sin and crime. There is a moral obligation on the individual living in such proximate danger to make it remote. In most cases this does not mean that he has to do anything in the supernatural order. He simply has to get up and get out, which is a purely natural action, though, being connected with a moral situation, it takes on as a consequence a moral significance. And thus it is that cooperation, which is a perfectly natural thing, takes on an ethical and, for the Christian, a supernatural significance. It becomes the natural means whereby the occasion is made remote and the world made safe for sanctity.

That this is not a mere bit of casuistry or speculation, the history of our time amply proves. There has been a great defection from religious beliefs in our own day. In recent times, whole nations have abandoned the faith of their fathers and have adopted a philosophy that is at least materialistic and in many cases anti-religious and anti-God. The occasion for this, if not the cause, is the fact that the common people, forced to live in near social and economic slavery, are face to face with a proximate occasion of defection from the faith. On the one hand is their Christian idealism to which they want to be faithful; but they find it hard to see in it the definite economic program that will liberate them from their present difficulties. On the other hand, they are exposed to the screaming, anti-God reformers whose programs of economic reform are most attractive.

They are caught on the horns of a dilemma. What will they do? It is certain that the individual, by the grace of God, need not succumb to the temptation, but man in the mass has fallen for it.

The proximate occasion must be removed if others are not to follow those who have already been led astray. The common man must be given a fighting chance to save his soul. The obligation of all religious bodies is to render the occasion remote. This can be done only by carrying out a program that is in conformity with religious principles and that will solve the economic difficulties of the people. If the maladjustments are removed, then the occasion becomes remote and the world will become a place where religion has a chance to flourish, where the weeds of greed and injustice no longer choke the flowers of virtue.

We have such flowers even now. Nobody can doubt the existence of modern saints. No one would deny that we have men and women of virtue and courage who would go to the lions in testimony of their faith and to prove their love for God and for their fellow-men. Such good and noble souls work unceasingly. But the odds are against them. A large section of the world's people are living in an environment that is so inimical to safe and decent living that they are like dwellers in an apartment house that is infected with every species of germ. Their pathetic condition appeals to us. In our charity we remove them from their surroundings, secure medical service and treatment for them, and restore them to normal health. Then we return them to the source of their infection. Common sense and science dictate that we should at least disinfect the premises before sending the patients back to them. Yet religious men and religious institutions are continually curing people of their moral ills and then sending them back to an unhealthy environment for further infection.

Religious men must change conditions

Moral reform is the first requisite for that housecleaning job. But moral reform alone is not enough. The vast majority of our people might become saints tomorrow, but if they had to return to immoral social, economic, and political institutions, their sanctity would be seriously threatened and would speedily degenerate. Moral reform implies that the reformed and the reformers will be intolerant of bad conditions. That is why Christianity in the beginning purged the pagan world of the immorality that characterized it. We must be realistic enough, moreover, to admit that there is little hope of bringing all the modern anti-social forces to repentance through moral persuasion alone. It is pure baby-talk and utter unrealism to expect any such marvel. The communists are right when they say we must use force. They are wrong,

however, when they demand a bloody revolution. What we need is a curbing economic force which, fundamentally, comes from the idealism that is founded on religion. We cannot ask Almighty God to perform miracles of grace while we ignore the natural means now at our disposal for effecting a change.

Religion dictates as a fundamental principle that social justice should obtain in the world. It would eliminate everything in the nature of injustice and unfair exploitation. But justice alone is not enough to insure a smoothly running world. Charity is necessary that justice may be merciful, man being prone to demand his pound of flesh and more. Cooperation reinforces the idea of charity in a new and powerful way. And whatever else it may or may not contribute to the progress of man, it will have proved to humanity that religion was practical in its idealism.

Even a casual survey of society reveals the fact that vast numbers of men are not made for a highly competitive world. They cannot survive in a society that believes in the survival of the fittest only. Our present system with its jungle ethics makes it impossible for these people to contribute their share to human progress and renders it difficult for them to reach the goal that should be theirs. They can be useful members of society, however, and more easily attain their end, every last one of them, if we build society on cooperative principles. If we changed it from an aggregation of fighting individualists to an integrated body of coordinated and cooperative cells, every individual person could then be a better, more useful, and more serviceable member of the organic whole. Each could then really give according to his abilities where he received according to his needs. As they are now they are in peril of salvation. They are being destroyed in a merciless system. In droves they seek safety in our cities but are led to the slaughter instead. Or they cower alone in the shelter of their rural ruins and slowly starve in their wretchedness. In increasing thousands, our men are becoming degenerate to the point where nothing can be done for them except to transport them to a state farm. That is not good enough.

Cooperatives build brotherly society

It is not sufficient to hold out a helping hand to our fellow-men in a time of crisis. It is more in keeping with the dignity of human personality that they should be given a chance to make their contribution and to move under their own power. This is charity in the real sense of the term. Through cooperation, the embodiment of charity in economics, we can build such a society where these needy brothers will have a chance to live and to contribute to the general good and the greater glory of God.

It is difficult to see how anybody, professing to be religious, would not take seriously this duty of charity toward his more needy neighbors.

From our early years, we Christians learned that the performance of the corporal works of mercy is an integral part of a religious life. We realize that we must visit the sick, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, redeem the captives, clothe the naked, harbor the harborless, and bury the dead. Individuals and organizations have, in their blessed charity, dedicated themselves to these holy personal offices. Like a draught of cold water upon the parched lips of one dying in the desert, their loving toil and sacrifice comes to a weary world whose soul is seared with selfishness. God be praised for such as these!

We shall have need of these always. But it is

quite apparent that the scope of their charity is limited. In addition, there is need also for those who will translate the corporal works of mercy into other forms, who will reach far out into the wastes of mankind to aid through organizations those whom they cannot contact personally. They will feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked by establishing cooperatives whereby the poor may obtain their daily material needs in full and adequate amounts. They will harbor the harborless, visit the sick, bury the dead, and ransom the captives by the establishment of those free, democratic, just, and charitable cooperative organizations. These will permit men to help themselves and their unfortunate neighbors and to move forward under the power of newly released group energies.